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Perceptions and Misperceptions: Exploring the U.S.-Russian Strategic Impasse

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In late November 2007, experts from the United States and the Russian Federation met in Washington, DC to discuss current bilateral relations and perceived opportunities and obstacles for addressing downward trends in this relationship. Sponsored by the Advanced Systems and Concepts Office (ASCO) of the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, the Committee on International Security and Arms Control (CISAC) of the National Academies, the Foundation for Military Reform in Moscow, and the Institute for USA and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences, these discussions included former and current officials from the military, technical, and policy communities of both countries.[1]

The overriding issue that dominated the three days of presentations and dialogue was the impact of “perceptions and misperceptions” on current U.S.-Russian relations. In many aspects, the United States and Russia have similar security concerns regarding the threats posed by terrorism and WMD proliferation. Moreover, there was complete agreement among the fifty participants that the potential for deliberate hostilities between the two countries was nonexistent. However, these apparent “unifying factors” were not perceived as sufficient to overcome the bilateral uncertainty and misunderstanding that currently surround strategic modernization efforts in both countries. On several occasions, workshop participants mentioned that the state of bilateral tensions reminded them of the atmosphere that existed in the early 1980s. As one Russian participant observed, “The classic Cold War model is reemerging—don’t cooperate easily; don’t give them anything….”

This somewhat pessimistic viewpoint was blunted, however, by the acknowledgement that important bilateral cooperation *does* takes place on a daily basis and these cooperative efforts are often underappreciated for their strategic significance. The continued success and transformation of the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) program, to include biological threat and hazard reduction projects; the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism (GICNT); the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP); and tremendous reductions in each country's strategic arsenal sizes all highlight bilateral cooperation and synergy in very sensitive areas. In addition, GICNT and GNEP underscore the collaborative global leadership role that the United States and Russia are assuming in the area of WMD threat reduction. These efforts may not be flawless and it is easy for pundits to highlight their shortcomings, but workshop participants from both countries stated that the uniqueness and significance of these cooperative efforts should not be dismissed. Moreover, leveraging and building upon these and other existing efforts could provide a natural means for enhancing overall bilateral relations but must be complemented by concerted efforts to reduce misperceptions. In the immediate timeframe, therefore, there are several key areas where joint dialogue and improved mutual understanding can contribute to improved U.S.-Russian relations and simultaneously meet the individual security interests of both countries.

The Nuclear Posture Review

Six years after its delivery to Congress, the Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) remains a central source of misperception between the United States and Russia. Perhaps the greatest perception challenge of the report is overcoming the Congressionally-mandated title of the document in favor of one such as "Strategic Posture Review" in order to underscore the reduced role of nuclear weapons in U.S. strategic planning. In regards to the Russian Federation, a key finding of the NPR is the specific statement that Russia is not considered to be an immediate threat to the United States and it is in the interest of the United States to pursue cooperative efforts with the Russian Federation. Also important from a U.S.—Russian perspective is the fact that the first briefing of the Nuclear Posture Review to a foreign government was provided to General Baluyevskiy, the Chief of the Russian General Staff. American experts attending the November workshop therefore emphasized that the NPR represents a major doctrinal shift in the treatment of Russia that has changed over fifty-years of Soviet/Russian-centric threat planning and that the priority placed on briefing the NPR to Russian officials symbolized the sincerity of these changes.

For Russian experts at the workshop, however, the symbolism and meaning of the Nuclear Posture Review are less clear. References were made during the discussions to purported classified sections of the NPR that are posted on the Internet and which mention continued concerns over Russia's nuclear forces and programs and the potential need to revise U.S. nuclear forces and posture if U.S.-Russian relations worsen in the future. To this point, U.S.

experts emphasized that they can't validate what is and is not available on the Internet, but one must be cautious in reading any document that is not validated in its authenticity or which is presented in a fragmented manner and does not contain the full context for individual statements. Moreover, they argued, what cannot be disputed is that the NPR clearly states that a "new framework" for cooperation with Russian must be encouraged and facilitated and a relationship based on Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) ended.[2] For many of the participating U.S. experts, this is the most significant change they have seen in U.S. strategic planning during their careers and it is difficult for them to understand how this significance is not appreciated by their Russian counter-parts.

Beyond this issue of how Russia is presented in the NPR, an equally troubling issue for the Russian participants was the concept of "global strike" contained within the NPR and the Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR). Global strike is understood by U.S. strategic planners to mean the pursuit of kinetic and non-kinetic capabilities (to include conventional and nuclear weapons) that can respond to a threat anywhere in the world within a period of thirty minutes or less. This rapid, precision-strike capability is envisioned as both a surgical strike tool as well as a robust deterrent since it provides a flexible and responsive warfighting asset that can hold a broad range of targets at risk around the world.[3] From the Russian perspective, however, "global strike" represents a potential preemptive or first strike capability in which conventional—and possibly nuclear—assets can surgically and rapidly decapitate Russia's strategic arsenal. Global strike is also seen as an expansion of the American precision-strike expertise that first raised Russian strategic concerns during the 1999 NATO operations in the Balkans. These technical and operational capabilities received tremendous attention within Russian military circles and demonstrated an American supremacy in warfighting that elevated precision-guided munitions (PGMs) to the level of strategic assets. Russian concerns over American preemption capabilities were further fueled in 2006 following a *Foreign Affairs* article in which the authors argued that an emerging U.S. nuclear primacy may well lead to American confidence in its ability to conduct an assured first strike against Russia.[4] Though discredited by experts in both the United State and Russia as not technically, operationally or politically viable, this "nuclear primacy" argument added fuel to the simmering fire of U.S.-Russian strategic misperceptions.

Beyond this issue of global strike, new and misunderstood terminology within the QDR and NPR also contributes to tensions between the United States and Russia. First and foremost is an American doctrinal shift to "capabilities-based planning" in which future U.S. force requirements are based on desired capabilities that can address a broad range of future threats. When briefing the findings from the NPR and QDR, U.S. participants clearly stated that the future threat environment was uncertain and difficult to predict, thus the United States must develop and foster capabilities that are not specific to one adversary and that are sufficient to respond to "unexpected and potential threat contingencies." Russian military experts, however, stated their inability to understand how viable planning can be accomplished in the absence of specific employment scenarios. Moreover, the Russian translation for "capabilities-based planning" is "to develop maximum capabilities in every area"—an interpretation that creates a rather bellicose image of the United States. For these perception/misperception reasons, recommendations were put forward to conduct a joint research effort to develop a bilingual reference guide on strategic terminology and concepts.

Nuclear Arsenal Size

Russian and American experts at the meetings appeared to agree that ongoing unilateral reductions in their strategic arsenals represent a tremendous step forward in global nonproliferation efforts. In Russia, however, there is concern that these "START to SORTS" reductions within the United States are based mostly on the dismantlement or re-declaration of heavy bombers and the rearming of these bombers with conventional weapons. This creates a great "return potential" for the United States and an ability to return to previous strategic numbers for some delivery vehicles. In addition, despite the goal of 1,700 to 2,200 nuclear warheads in

2010, Russian experts believe there is a 2,500 to 3,500 warhead “comeback or return potential” for the United States above these baseline numbers due to the nature of the stockpile stewardship program. In response to these concerns over the reconstitution capability of the U.S. strategic stockpile and delivery vehicles, American experts stated that while this capability does exist in theory, it is a very complicated endeavor and process and would not take days or weeks but rather months or longer to execute.

Concerning the near-term future of Russia’s nuclear stockpile, experts from the Russian Federation stated that Russia will have 800-1,000 land-based warheads and approximately 600 naval and 400 air-leg warheads. Moreover, the Russian Federation does not believe it needs to go to the highest threshold of these numbers or to the numbers allowed by the Moscow Treaty since a decision was made in 2005 in the Russian Security Council—and agreed upon by President Putin—to not try to reach numeric parity with the United States but rather to achieve a “balance of capabilities.” This decision seems to represent a capabilities-based argument in that overall numbers do not matter, only the operational capabilities of the various systems and warheads. And while Russian strategic modernization from the U.S. perspective is also providing Russia with a first strike capability[5], Russian experts stated that ongoing modernization in command and control, SSBN and Topol-M forces is a serious and costly investment in a survivable second strike capability.

Nuclear Alert and “Hair-trigger” Postures

An additional area of significant disagreement and misperception between the American and Russian experts at the November 2007 workshop was the status and meaning of nuclear alert postures in both countries. Russian experts repeatedly made reference to an American “hair-trigger” posture and the potential for this perceived posture to create a tight crisis response time or an increased vulnerability to an unauthorized launch.

In regards to the Russian perception that U.S. strategic forces are postured for rapid nuclear release, American experts highlighted that U.S. bombers are off alert; there is a reduced bomber role in U.S. war plans; a reduced ICBM force; and submarines have a reduced posture with fewer numbers are at sea, a relaxed range from potential targets and are not in constant communications with national command. Moreover, U.S. submarines are at sea because of survivability—not rapid response of strategic forces—so the U.S. posture is focused on the ability to always strike second, not an ability to strike first. In addition, at least one U.S. expert emphasized that pushing to reduce alert statuses through de-alerting initiatives can be destabilizing as this can give an adversary the incentive to preempt.[6] The real concern, according to this American expert, should be the survivability of strategic forces and the United States is therefore posturing forces so they are stable and survivable and not to gain any incentive to attack first. Interestingly, this argument of posturing for survivability rather than a first-

strike capability was the same explanation made by the Russian experts for their ongoing modernization efforts.

Concerning the potential vulnerability and risk of unauthorized use created by U.S. alert postures, an American expert explained that in addition to a robust set of negative technical and procedural controls to prevent unauthorized use, American weapon systems are also loaded with training packages and targeted on ocean areas. So even if they could theoretically be launched, these weapons would target only ocean areas. In response to a question about the unauthorized movement of nuclear cruise missiles from Minot, an American expert

emphasized that these missiles were not part of the U.S. alert forces but this does not negate the need for proper planning and accountability of all nuclear assets. In addition, a Russian military expert agreed that Russian and American forces have a robust capability to block the launch of their nuclear forces through the use of negative control systems, but a significant difference in the Russian approach is that they have a “zero flight plan” loaded into the computers on their missiles and the system is not able to receive launch orders with this zero flight plan loaded. Therefore, one would have to enter a flight plan before the computer can receive orders and this is almost impossible for people trying to execute an unauthorized launch.

A final area of significant concern for some Russian military experts regarding the posturing of U.S. nuclear forces relates to the potential use of American nuclear assets in a regional context when the survivability of the United States is not at stake. According to some Russians, the U.S. nuclear doctrine theoretically allows the United States to use nuclear weapons in a regional context away from the United States when U.S. interests are at stake but the actual survivability of the United States as a nation is not at risk. Russian nuclear doctrine, however, only permits the use of nuclear capabilities when actual national survival is at risk. This, according to the Russian experts, is the most prominent doctrinal area where Russia and the United States differ.

In response to these perceptions and misperceptions over U.S. and Russian nuclear postures, two primary recommendations were put forward by the Russian participants. One expert emphasized the importance of having bilateral confidence in existing negative control procedures and the need to have Russian and American C3 experts sit down together and quietly analyze this problem. Control and blocking (i.e. negative controls), he argued, is the right area for bilateral cooperation and discussion and can be done without the risk that either country will enter into each other’s sensitive positive control areas. Such a discussion between U.S. and Russian C3 experts was initiated ten years ago in California but nothing permanent came of this effort.[7]

A second Russian recommendation concerned establishing three different levels or degrees of alert for strategic forces in the United States. “High alert” can be established for a limited number of weapons (~500) that are sufficient for regional contingencies but not enough to cover all of Russia. “Medium alert”—the ability to launch in days to weeks—can include bringing weapons

and bombers back together for eventual weapon delivery. “Low alert” would be for the majority of nuclear weapons which would be disassembled as part of their “low alert” status and therefore require time to reassemble . From the Russian perspective, these three levels would ensure a minimal, assured second strike capability but the United States would not be able to execute its entire target list immediately. This approach would also allow the United States to signal to regional actors by ramping up alert status in response to rising tensions.[8]

Ballistic Missile Defense

Ballistic missile defense in Europe emerged as an important political and symbolic theme during the workshop. Russian participants emphasized the perception that the United States was showing a lack of respect for the Russian Federation by attempting to push forward with the BMD sites in Poland and the Czech Republic without giving adequate consideration for Russian views. According to the Russian experts, the proposed BMD system does in fact have a limited capability against Russian systems and though this would have a negligible impact on the overall Russian deterrent, the unwillingness of the United States to acknowledge this limited capability was considered a diplomatic snub. In addition, a published analysis from one of the participants addressed the political aspects of BMD:

One of the reasons for Moscow’s sharp reaction to Washington’s missile defense plans is the arrogance with which the incumbent White House administration makes unilateral decisions on strategic issues. And although U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asserted that Moscow had been informed about U.S. plans to deploy missile defense bases in Poland and the Czech Republic on a dozen occasions, apparently this is not the type of format for relations that suits Russia. Rice’s statement evoked immediate reaction from European leaders, who called for close consultations on missile defense problems in a U.S.-NATO-Russia dialogue. An even more constructive solution would be Russia’s direct participation in developing and jointly using not only a European antimissile system, but also a global system.[9]

Moreover, several of the Russian presenters underscored that a joint BMD capability in Europe would enhance bilateral relations and overall system effectiveness based on both the technical enhancements as well as the important symbolic value of a joint defense against Iran and other emerging threats. Among the short-term opportunities for overcoming the bilateral impasse on BMD were the recommendations for joint analysis on threats, a follow-up to the 2005 joint tabletop exercise on ballistic missile defense against third-party actors[10], and a joint study on information exchange requirements during BMD operations.

U.S. experts also pointed to the political aspects of BMD and stated that Russia’s reaction to BMD in Europe was in fact primarily political since U.S. officials briefed their Russian counter-parts about the possibility of a third site in Europe for several years and so it was not a surprise. One American participant reminded the participants that cooperation with Russia in ballistic missile defense was an important recommendation in the Nuclear Posture Review and therefore not something that the current administration opposed. Moreover, borrowing from the same article previously referenced, U.S. BMD capabilities in Europe do not have the technical capability to threaten Russia’s nuclear deterrent:

The extension of the U.S. missile defense system will not threaten Russia’s nuclear-missile potential in the near future, that is, until around the year 2015. The flight paths of Russian strategic missiles, capable of hypothetically deterring the U.S., indeed pass outside the antimissile operation zone in Europe, especially since they are designed to destroy warheads in mid-flight, rather than shoot down missiles at the boost stage. Moreover, Russian strategic missiles are equipped with such powerful ABM defense suppression systems and other assets, including hundreds of decoy targets and jamming stations, that even with “favorable” (in terms of missile defense) flight paths, as many as ten antimissiles would be needed to destroy just one

warhead. Therefore, President Vladimir Putin and ex-Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov were quite right when they said that no missile defense system poses a threat to Russia's strategic missiles. This will also hold true even if the U.S. deploys ten such bases in Poland and the Czech Republic. Ditto for missile defense bases on U.S. soil.[11]

Taken together, these Russian and American arguments and sentiments clearly point to the ongoing bilateral impasse being anchored in political realities, not technical or operational capabilities.

The Russian experts attending the November workshop provided several possible joint approaches for overcoming the BMD impasse. First on the list was for the United States to agree to not deploy ground-based interceptors (GBI) in Europe until a threat emerges. This, the Russians argued, would not cost the United State anything in an operational sense since the proposed GBI site in Poland—if approved—would not be ready for many years. From the Russian side this type of U.S. declaration would provide some assurances that the United States would consult with Russia before expanding its BMD footprint in Europe. An additional proposal was for a joint deployment of existing U.S. and Russian systems to meet near-term BMD needs, such as the S-300/400 systems, PAC-3, Arrow, Aegis, etc. This would ensure protection for Southern Europe, Turkey, and Greece. Moreover, this type of arrangement would constitute a quasi alliance against Iran and also provide a clear signaling capability to potential adversaries. Finally, if the Memorandum of Understanding for the Joint Data Exchange Center is implemented, this would integrate some aspects of Russian and American missile defense and could also make the United States "third site" in the Czech Republic a de facto cooperative effort if JDEC utilized its data.

NPT Article 6

Understanding NPT Article 6 commitments and obligations within the 21st century risk environment was another significant and recurring theme during the workshop. Participants explored the possibility of creating a bilateral study group to look at the original intention of the NPT and the global risk environment at that time and whether these timelines and obligations were being adequately met through unilateral reductions. Included in this analysis could be a discussion of whether a perceived emphasis on nuclear weapons in national strategies undermines NPT obligations. Finally, existing rules and guidelines for the regimes and agreements that support the NPT were considered inadequate for international coordination and cooperation in the 21st century and thus in need of some revision.

Tactical Nuclear Weapons

In the course of the discussion on NPT Article 6 obligations, U.S. experts stated that consideration must also be given to accounting for tactical nuclear weapons and whether Russia is making serious efforts to reduce and account for its stockpile. Russian experts responded that they did not understand this U.S. concern because Russian tactical nuclear weapons are all stored on Russian territory while the United States has a few hundred deployed in Europe. Moreover, they argued, loose nuclear weapons are more of a Pakistani issue—and sometimes a U.S. Air Force issue.[12] But while Russia is unhappy about U.S. tactical nuclear weapons being deployed in Europe, one expert stated that it might be counterproductive to have the United States remove all of its tactical nuclear weapons in Europe since some European countries may then change their minds on not needing their own nuclear capabilities. And in response to the U.S. inquiry about weapon accountability, several of the Russian experts stated that a confidential exchange of information regarding the status of U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons was possible and had been raised with DOE officials a few years ago.[13] Specifically, this exchange of information would not involve a verification regime but rather a confidential dialogue on where and what is stored.[14]

Final Thoughts

In closing the discussion on the future of U.S.-Russian relations, a Russian expert underscored that both countries recently celebrated the first 200 years of their bilateral relationship. For the first 150 years, Russia and the United States were allies or quasi-allies. World War II was a high point in this relationship despite Stalin and the ideological differences between the two countries. The end of World War II led to a bipolar environment during the Cold War, but the United States and Russia were partners in the concept of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). With the end of the Cold War came a “unipolar moment” when both presidents declared strategic partnership but the lack of symmetry allowed the United States to move unilaterally. Now, the world is moving back to a multi-polar system due to globalization, and historically, Russia and the United States have never been enemies in a multi-polar world.

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References

1. As these workshop discussions were conducted under Chatham House rules, the specific comments and viewpoints presented in this article are not attributed to specific participants. The conference report is available here.

2. These specific statements can also be found in the Pentagon briefing concerning the release of the Nuclear Posture Review. See “DoD News Briefing, Wednesday, 09 Jan 2002—3:00pm.” Available online here.

3. The concepts, goals, and requirements for prompt global strike can be found in numerous sections of the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report (QDR), dated 6 February 2006.

4. Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The Rise of U.S. Nuclear Primacy” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2006). For a more detailed discussion of their argument, see Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, “The End of MAD? The Nuclear Dimension of U.S. Primacy” *International*

Security, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Spring 2006), 7–44. For Russian perspectives on this primacy argument, see Yegor Gaidar, “Nuclear Punditry Can be a Dangerous Game,” *Financial Times* (29 March 2006); and Valery Yarynich and Steven Starr, “Nuclear Primacy is a Fallacy,” *Intelligent.ru* (8 June 2006). For commentary from Russian experts who dismiss the arguments of U.S. nuclear primacy or the notion that this article was sanctioned by the Pentagon, see Pavel Semenovich Zolotarev, "A Nuclear Tempest in a Teapot: The Tendency Toward Operations Using Force—Is not yet Cause for Alarm," *Nezavisimoye Voyennoye Obozreniye* (8 April 2006); and “Press Conference with Political and Military Analysts Alexei Arbatov and Yevgeny Kozhokin on RF-USA Cooperation for Strategic Stability,” *RIA Novosti* (11 April 2006), *www.fednews.ru*.

5. See: http://www.nipp.org/publications.php.

6. A counter-point made during the workshop was that de-alerting initiatives, such as the removal of warheads from delivery vehicles, could provide some degree of crisis escalation control and avoid the potential for a launch-on-warning response, thus preventing an authorized launch against a false threat. To this point, a U.S. participant stated that significant consideration has been given by U.S. strategic leaders during training and exercises to riding out a first strike and then executing a measured, and potentially conventional, response. In addition, there are concerns with lowering the response rate of ICBMs as this would be non-verifiable and must rely on trust. There is also a technical challenge in doing this with the Minuteman III as it was designed to be spun-up for war and not spun-up and down for training. So this creates a reliability issue when spinning-down ICBMs today as they theoretically might not spin back up.

7. Referring to the 4-14 August 1997 unofficial meeting in La Jolla, California, of U.S. and Russian command and control experts.

8. This concept of tiered alert statuses is described in Sergey Rogov, Victor Esin and Pavel Zolotarev, “Reducing Nuclear Tensions: How Russia and the United States Can Go Beyond Mutual Assured Destruction.” Institute of the United States and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences (19 January 2005).

9. Gen. Vladimir Dvorkin, “U.S. BMD: A Threat Assessment,” *Russian in Global Affairs* 5, No. 2 (April-June 2007): 31-32.

10. This two-day tabletop exercise involved a joint exploration of unilateral and bilateral actions and options during a ballistic missile attack on the United States by a third state actor. Including Russian experts and U.S. officials, the tabletop exercise was held in Monterey, CA and the results outbriefed two days later in Omaha, NE.

11. Gen. Vladimir Dvorkin, “U.S. BMD: A Threat Assessment,” *Russian in Global Affairs* 5, No. 2 (April-June 2007): 28-29.

12. This comment is referring to the 30 August 2007 incident of six nuclear-armed cruise missiles being inadvertently flown on a B-52 from Minot AFB to Barksdale AFB.

13. One Russian expert also emphasized that a recommendation for confidential information exchange on tactical nuclear weapon status would have to come from the United States as various factors in the Russian bureaucracy would prevent the Russian-side from proposing such an initiative.

14. Russian tactical nuclear weapons are discussed in some detail in the 2005 article “The Truth about ‘Suitcase Nukes,’” *Yaderny Kontrol* Digest 10, No. 1-2 (Winter/Spring 2005). Another article in the same publication refers to a visit by Gen. Habiger to a Russian storage site; see Vladimir Verkhovtsev, “Nuclear Weapons Security— Russia’s Top Priority in the Long Term.”